

NEGP MONTHLY

A monthly indepth look at states and communities and their efforts to reach the National Education Goals
Published by the NATIONAL EDUCATION GOALS PANEL

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The NEGP MONTHLY is a publication of the National Education Goals Panel in conjunction with the Daily Report Card.

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Writer's Block

Students across the country do not possess adequate writing skills. The 1998 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in writing found that only a sliver of students tested are at an advanced level in writing (1%). "Students show only partial mastery of the knowledge and skills needed for solid academic performance in writing," said Gary Phillips, acting commissioner for the National Center for Education Statistics.

However, students in several states are moving to the head of the class. This Monthly explores efforts underway in Massachusetts, Maine and Texas to improve student writing. These states, along with Connecticut, significantly outperformed the national average on the 1998 NAEP writing exam.

Overview

*"Of all those arts in which the wise excel,
Nature's chief masterpiece is writing well."*

*John Sheffield,
Essay on Poetry (1682)*

New data on student writing indicates that only 1% of all students write well – if not masterpieces, at least at the "Advanced" level, according to the 1998 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) exam in writing. While many students can write at a basic, minimally effective level, few can write at a higher level. Only about one-quarter of the students performed at the "Proficient" achievement level and only one percent of the students in each grade performed at the highest, or "Advanced," achievement level. "The average, or typical, American student is not a proficient writer," said Gary Phillips, acting commissioner for the National Center for Education Statistics, on releasing the findings. "Instead, students show only partial mastery of the knowledge and skills needed for solid academic performance in writing."

These findings do not bode well for students who face higher



expectations and more rigorous standards at school and, eventually, in the workplace. “How well students write at the end of the 20th century is an indicator of how well they will be able to communicate and reason in the beginning of the 21st century,” surmised Phillips.

Assessing student achievement in a variety of subjects is the essence of the National Education Goals Panel’s work. Goal 3: Student Achievement and Citizenship addresses student progress in writing, which is a skill critical to achieve mastery of challenging subject matter in many fields. This Monthly focuses on Goal 3 and its indicator of student achievement in NAEP’s writing assessment.

Programs underway in Maine, Massachusetts and Texas, three of the four top-performing states in the 1998 NAEP exam in writing. Connecticut, the top-performing state, will be featured in the November Monthly. These states, along with Wisconsin and the Department of Defense schools, are the only ones to score above the national average on the NAEP 8th-grade exam in writing.

State officials in the states presented in this Monthly point to statewide drives to improve student writing through standards and testing that require students to write essays (Goal 3 activities). Each state also linked high student writing achievement to teacher professional development that helped teachers guide and assess student writing (Goal 4 activities). Many of the writing programs are tied directly to reading initiatives in the schools.

The Monthly begins with an overview of the NAEP writing results and a description of a nationwide writing program, The National Writing Project. The balance of the Monthly is focused on promising practices from Maine, Massachusetts and Texas.

NAEP Writing Results

Writing is not a strength of most American students, according to the latest NAEP exam in writing. Only 1% of students at each grade level tested – 4, 8 and 12 – wrote at an “Advanced” level, and only one-quarter of the students performed at the “Proficient” achievement level. Student results are from the nationwide survey of student writing achievement at grades 4, 8 and 12 using achievement levels developed by the National Assessment Governing Board. The “Basic” level indicates at least partial mastery of the knowledge and skills needed for proficient work at each grade.

The NAEP writing assessment gives students 25 minutes to compose one of three different types of essays: narrative, informative or persuasive. Responses are evaluated according to three key elements of writing: development, organization and grammar. Following are some findings from the report:

- Only 23 percent of 4th graders wrote at the proficient level or above. 84 percent wrote at the basic level or above, and 16 percent were below the basic level.
- Twenty-seven percent of 8th graders were at least proficient, 84 percent were at least basic, and 16 percent were below basic.
- Twenty-two percent of 12th graders were proficient, 78 percent were basic and 22 percent were below basic.
- At each grade level, only 1 percent of students wrote at an advanced level.

For the first time, it is possible to compare the writing skill of 8th-grade students in the states. Among the 35 states, District of Columbia and Virgin Islands that tested an additional 100,000 8th-grade public school students, Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, Texas, Wisconsin, the Department of Defense Domestic Depen-



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dent Elementary and Secondary Schools (DDESS) and the Department of Defense Dependents Schools (Overseas) scored higher than the national average on the assessment. The average grade 8 scale score for the states for public schools only is 148. Connecticut scored 165; DDESS, 160; DoDDS, 156; Maine and Massachusetts, 155; Texas, 154; and Wisconsin, 153.

Girls outperform boys at all grade levels and in all jurisdictions. An achievement gap exists: whites and Asians outperformed Native Americans, African Americans and Hispanics at all three grade levels. However, the highest scores for both black and Hispanic students were not in a state, but in the schools operated by the Defense Department for military dependents.

Approximately 160,000 students participated in the 1998 writing assessment: 20,000 at each grade in the national assessment, and 100,000 in the state level assessment. Eighth graders in thirty-five states and four other jurisdictions participated in the state level survey, giving state-level results for the first time.

NAEP is overseen by the National Center for Education Statistics, a unit of the U.S. Department of Education. The National Assessment Governing Board, a separate and independent body, uses a judgement-based process to set achievement levels for reporting NAEP results.

Key Factors of Excellent Writing

Several school factors correlate with higher levels of writing performance, according to the NAEP writing report. Certain elements of "process writing," in which a writer rethinks ideas and ways of expressing those ideas, are associated with better writing performance. These elements include teachers whom:

- require students to write drafts and plan their writing product;
- talk to their students about writing;
- save student writing in portfolios;
- require students to use computers in writing.

National Assessment Governing Board member Marilyn Whirry, who also teaches 12th-grade English, comments on what has been learned from the NAEP studies about good writing:

"Students must write frequently to maintain and improve their skills. . . . writing well not only requires practice, but planning as well. . . . Students who showed evidence of planning [on the NAEP writing exam] for both of the prompts they were given score higher



than those who planned for only one, and those who planned only once score higher than those who didn't do any planning at all.

Of course, that may just seem to be a matter of common sense. But deliberate planning is also an important part of the process by which good writing can be taught. Research indicates that writing, like reading, is a recursive process. The mature writer rethinks ideas throughout the process of writing. Through pre-writing, drafting, responding to peers, and drafting again, the writer's thoughts are clarified, organized and perfected."

Whirry goes on to say that keeping portfolios helps develop good writers, probably because portfolios "demand that students evaluate and reflect upon their individual pieces of writing. The close analysis of one's own work cannot but help to improve it."

The National Writing Project

The National Writing Project (NWP) was launched 25 years ago as the Bay Area Writing Project (BAWP), based at the University of California-Berkeley. The project was founded by a small group of classroom teachers, faculty and administrators at Berkeley who resolved to undertake a new way of teaching writing. They decided to emphasize writing complete essays at a time when most writing instruction emphasized only mastery of the conventions of grammar. They also constructed a new model for professional development that honors the expertise and leadership of classroom teachers.

In 1974, when the BAWP emerged, new teachers were taught how to teach reading but not writing, notes James Gray and Richard Sterling, former and current executive directors of the National Writing Project. "More fundamentally, neither the universities nor the schools gave any serious attention to the continuing education of classroom teachers," they write in an essay at the NWP web site (www-gse.berkeley.edu/research/nwp). The early members of BAWP resolved to change current practice and introduce an innovative concept: teachers teaching teachers.

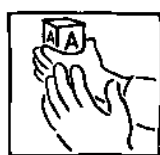
BAWP evolved into a nationwide education program of teacher networks to improve student writing. Now called the National Writing Project (NWP), the program is active at 161 sites at universities in 47 states and Puerto Rico. An extensive network of top-notch writing teachers promotes exemplary instruction of writing and reaches more than 100,000 teachers every year. Each site offers an intensive institute every summer and invites distinguished local teachers of writing from all grade levels – kindergarten to university – to attend.

According to Sterling, the approach at the institutes is to "give teachers experiences with the kind of practices that help students achieve." For example, teachers attending the institutes are asked to write. "They write multiple drafts, discuss their writing, revise their writing and prepare it for publication," said Sterling. "They write for a variety of purposes and audiences and then translate these practices into lessons for their students," he added. These practices include editing for grammatical accuracy but emphasize writing for more than one audience and purpose.

The NWP has become a rigorous selection process for teacher participants at the institutes. A nomination application and interview is required of all teachers. Teachers are selected based on their demonstrable success as teachers of writing and for their promise to become equally successful teachers of teachers. Participants come from all grade levels (K-university), public and private schools in urban, suburban and rural areas. Teachers typically receive graduate credit for participating in the institute and, if possible, receive modest



THE NATIONAL EDUCATION GOALS



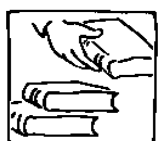
Ready to Learn



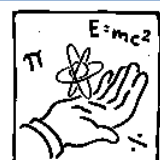
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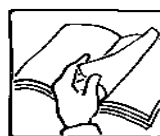
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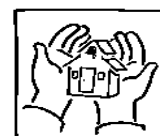
Teacher Education and Professional Development



Mathematics and Science



Adult Literacy and Lifelong Learning



Safe, Disciplined, and Drug-Free Schools



Parental Participation

stipends for tuition, fees, books associated with the institutes.

“These teachers become the teachers of other teachers during the school year,” said Sterling. “They are credible as mentors because they come directly from their own classrooms to lead sustained professional development.”

The NWP has become a federally funded professional development program. Some of the networks of NWP sites receive state funds. Massachusetts has two NWP sites, Maine has one and Texas has seven sites throughout the state.

Massachusetts

Massachusetts grade 8 students, like students in Maine, Texas and Connecticut, scored significantly above the U.S. average the 1998 NAEP exam in writing. The state’s students had a scale score of 155, higher than the national average of 148.

Susan Wheltle, coordinator for the humanities frameworks with the Massachusetts Department of Education, holds that the state’s long-term interest in student writing achievement caused many local districts and schools to institute, evaluate and reform writing programs. According to Wheltle, the English Language Arts framework is one of the oldest sets of standards produced by the state. The framework offers a “really very detailed explanation about the writing process, with an emphasis on drafting and revision and publication,” she said.

Teachers tell Wheltle that the framework along with a statewide assessment system that requires students in grades 4, 8 and 10 to write long compositions, has had a strong, positive effect in the schools as teachers grapple with how they teach writing. The Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) measures the performance of students, schools and districts on the academic learning standards in the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks, which fulfills requirements of the Education Reform Law of 1993. The first MCAS tests in English Language Arts, Mathematics and Science & Technology occurred in May 1998. Writing prompts are used only on the English Language Arts tests to provide a stimulus for students to write a composition. Some of the prompts relate to a brief reading passage.

Long and Short Compositions receive scores of 0-20 and 0-10, respectively. The scoring of student writing is completed by Advanced Systems scorers and by Massachusetts’s teachers at three Massachusetts Writing Institutes. Over 750 Massachusetts educators currently employed by schools systems throughout the



What is the National Education Goals Panel?

The National Education Goals Panel is a unique bipartisan body of state and federal officials created in 1990 by President Bush and the nation's Governors to report state and national progress and urge education improvement efforts to reach a set of National Education Goals.

Who serves on the National Education Goals Panel and how are they chosen?

Eight governors, four state legislators, four members of the U.S. Congress, and two members appointed by the President serve on the Goals Panel. Members are appointed by the leadership of the National Governors' Association, the National Conference of State Legislatures, the U.S. Senate and House, and the President.

What does the Goals Panel do?

The Goals Panel has been charged to:

- Report state and national progress toward the National Education Goals.
- Work to establish a system of high academic standards and assessments.
- Identify promising and effective reform strategies.
- Recommend actions for state, federal and local governments to take.
- Build a nationwide, bipartisan consensus to achieve the Goals.

The annual Goals Report and other publications of the Panel are available without charge upon request from the Goals Panel or at its web site www.negp.gov. Publications requests can be made by mail, fax, or e-mail, or Internet.

state participated in the Writing Institutes.

Wheltle underscored the importance of professional development to improve student achievement in writing and other subjects. The state currently is focusing on professional development that targets 8th-grade reading and math. "We are planning this fall a series of professional development sessions for eighth-grade teachers whose students did not score well on MCAS in reading and math," said Wheltle. Teachers from schools with low writing and math scores were invited to participate.

The state Department of Education also sponsors a variety of after-school and weekend programs, some devoted to writing. The department also works with the National Writing Project, which has summer institutes for teachers of writing in Boston and western Massachusetts.

Finally, Wheltle said Massachusetts is one of the states that has received a Reading Excellence Act grant to work with primary school children "who soon will be 4th- and 8th-graders taking the MCAS and NAEP exams."

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Maine

Maine like Massachusetts was one of only four states that outperformed the U.S. average in the 1998 NAEP writing exam. Maine, like Massachusetts, had an average scale score of 155, compared to the national average of 148.

Brud Maxcy, coordinator of Maine Education Assessment, with the state Department of Education, traces Maine students' success back to the creation of the state's 1984 education reform laws. "Much happened at this time related to instruction in the schools," said Maxcy. At this time, Maine introduced a statewide assessment system. The test was administered in the 1985-1986 school year, and "we were asking students to take an hour and craft a response to a writing prompt," explained Maxcy.

According to Maxcy, two Maine teachers score every



From the Library

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(www.nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/, (877)4ED-Pubs)

Stevens, Robert J.; Slavin, Robert E.; and Farnish, Ann Marie (November 1989). *A Cooperative Learning Approach to Elementary Reading and Writing Instruction: Long-Term Effects*. Report No. 42. Baltimore, Maryland: Center for Research on Elementary and Middle Schools, Johns Hopkins University.

For More Information

National Center for Education Statistics. U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement. 555 New Jersey Avenue NW. Washington, D.C. 20001. (202)219-1442.
<http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/index.html>

National Education Goals Panel. 1255 22nd Street. Suite 502. Washington, D.C. 20037. (202)724-0015.
www.negp.gov

National Writing Project.. 5511 Tolman Hall. #1670. University of California-Berkeley. Berkeley, California 94720-1670. (510)642-0963. www.berkeley.edu

student response. Scores must agree within one point or it is scored again by the chief reader. "This process has been underway for 15 years and we have become more and more efficient at it," said Maxcy. He noted that the scoring rubric has been modified twice.

From the beginning, teachers scored the writing exams, said Maxcy. Professional development programs burgeoned to help teachers in the scoring process. The Maine Department of Education sponsors a 2 ½ day workshop on scoring during the school year. "Fifteen years later, we have a waiting list of teachers at each grade level (4, 8, 11), wanting to score the student writing papers," reports Maxcy. He added that there are several local-level training programs where schools have their own writing assessment.

Maxcy agrees with NAEP findings about the importance of developing portfolios of student work. He notes that teachers in Maine have been involved in portfolio development in the language arts as well as science and math. The Maine Assessment Portfolio System is two years old, a new initiative that accompanies the State Learning results.

"Currently Maine's assessment program is diversifying types of writing – writing for different audiences and in different modes," said Maxcy. During the past year, the exam offered two writing prompts: one common to all students, the other covered writing for a variety of purposes – narrative, informative and persuasive, like NAEP. At the lower grades, students faced a prompt to produce a narrative. Secondary students had a prompt to produce a persuasive piece, but it could change from year to year.

"We also have an exciting new venture," said Maxcy. "For the first time we will be sending all student essays back to the schools. Each school will get a CD ROM of its students' work. This is very instructive to look at the outcome of your own instruction." He added: "This has the potential to be one of the most powerful things we have done. Teachers need this to make good decisions about their instruction."

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Texas

Texas is a top-performing state in the 1998 NAEP writing exam, with an average scale score of 154, placing on par with Connecticut, Maine and Massachusetts.

Christine Joosten, project manager of the office of statewide initiatives, Texas Education Agency, also points to an early emphasis by the state on writing as educators and policymakers constructed the Texas Essential Knowledge Skills and the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS), the statewide assessment for grades 4, 8 and 10. "Writing is a strand of the language arts curriculum that is clearly identified from early elementary through secondary school," said Joosten.

TAAS allows for an evaluation of student writing in fourth and eighth grade that "drives a lot of our teachers to focus on the importance of writing," she added. In order to help students and their families prepare for TAAS, the Texas Education Agency prepared a publication that features activities designed to improve skills in writing, reading and math. *Growing Through TAAS* for fourth graders and *Exploring Through TAAS* for eighth graders include writing strategies and lessons to help students improve their skills.

Joosten also mentioned the Texas Reading Initiative, which integrates instruction in reading with writing. Writing is one of the twelve essential components of research-based programs for beginning reading instruction, according to Joosten. The Rising Star writing project, a joint venture of Baylor University, the Texas Council of teachers of English and the Waco Independent School District, motivates Texas elementary school students by offering them an opportunity to be published, she added. The program honors excellence in elementary student writing – narrative and poetry – and art. All Texas elementary schools are invited to send entries to Rising Star. Winners' work is displayed in a publication called *Rising Star*, which becomes a model of outstanding writing for all teachers and students, said Joosten.

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NAEP is administered by the National Center for Education Statistics, a unit of the U.S. Department of Education. The full text of the 1998 NAEP Writing Report Card, as well as separate reports for each of the participating states and jurisdictions, can be found at www.nces.ed.gov/nationsreoprtcard/. All NAEP reports can be ordered by calling toll-free (877)4ED-PUBS.